

The measure of quality education

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Comment

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I was browsing through Forbes (July 17) when the headline *Ranking the US Celebrity 100* caught my attention. Given the craze to rank all things (the latest being "quality of death" where Malaysia is no. 33 out of 40 countries according to *The Economist*, July 17), I was curious to read about the ranking of celebrities.

The criteria is said to be "a blended measure of earnings and buzz (read: fame)". Page 6l explains: Earnings estimates are for June 1, 2009 to June 1, 2010 and include income derived solely from entertainment activities; although management, agent and attorney fees have not been deducted. The sources of the data were listed.

"Buzz" is social rank calculated using metrics such as Facebook friends and fans as well as Twitter followers, overall press accounts of Factiva, the number of times a celebrity's image appeared on the cover of 25 English language consumer magazines, web hits on Google Blog Search and TV/radio mentions on LexisNexis.

The criteria are clear, specific, standardised, transparent and verifiable — in most cases, the bones of contention when it comes to rankings. So when Oprah Winfrey was declared *numero uno* with US\$315 million (RM1 billion) to her name, few cried foul. Beyonce Knowles, in second place, has US\$87 million compared to James Cameron in the third spot with US\$210 million. Tiger Woods (US\$105 million) is in fifth place, while U2 (US\$130 million) at seventh.



You would have thought Woods has created enough "buzz" to take the top spot — after all the metrics for social rank appear rather open-ended but apparently they are not! Curiously, "buzz" is about impact or outcome, not processes. As long as the impact or outcome meets the criteria, the "how" including scandals, presumably is not of concern. On the contrary, it could be an advantage.

Then again, not all things can be ranked easily or should be the subject of one. Should we rank houses of worship with criteria as specific as "earnings" and "buzz"?

How about a world ranking of parliaments? It is unheard of, even though our future and lives depend on them. It is just not done. A university is an institution far more complex than houses of worship and parliaments combined, making its measure even more complicated.

Among the many reasons put forward to rank tertiary institutions, the most compelling revolves around their commercial — not educational — value.

Rankings have taken on a status that many find hard to resist of late. What is the alternative? The recent Rating System for Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia (SETARA) is different in that it is a rating system, not ranking.

Rating emphasises "similarities" rather than "differences" and a tiered system. Although in some ways it mirrors ranking when you compare inter- and intra-tiers, it is not meant to be so. It is a fairer system because the differentiating points are often too small to be significant.

Rating takes into account an agreed minimum standard as the "cut-off point for each tier, where being unique could be a liability.

For instance, the recent exercise is focused on teaching because the idea is to create a level playing field between private and public learning institutions. Being good in research and development, for example, is not taken into account. Many private institutions and the newer public universities will lose out if R&D is rated.

Even when R&D is included, other "uniqueness" will be missed out. This is the limitation of rating that most appreciate. SETARA is more reliable because it validates and verifies on-site unlike the world ranking exercises so far.

So it is not strange if within the same tier in the recent SETARA, the institutional placing is not reflective of world rankings since only through validation and verification can inherent flaws and intellectual dishonesty be reined in.

The fact that SETARA is done within three years as a developmental exercise and not a yearly "competition" driven by commercial interest is also a plus!

A meaningful development of the education sector needs time; otherwise it is more of cosmetic change.

In the final analysis, what matters is the quality assurance standards accorded to an organisation by an independent accrediting agency. The main objective must be to measure "quality" education.

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